A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

IN

DEDHAM,

DECEMBER 25, 1797;

BEING THE FESTIVAL OF CHRISTMAS.

BY THOMAS THATCHER, A. M.
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"RARA TEMPORUM FELICITATE, UBI SENTIRE QUÆ VELIS ET QUÆ SENTIAS DICERE LICET."

TACITUS.

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To the PUBLIC.

THE following discourse was delivered in the Episcopal Church in Dedham, *on Christmas day,* 1797, *in compliance with the wishes of a number of respectable characters, and also the request of the Rev.* William Montague, *who was engaged to preach on the same day in another Church.*

Soon after, I was informed that it was the unanimous desire of the hearers that the sermon might be printed, and I was solicited to furnish a copy for the press; in consequence of which I have submitted it to public inspection.

As my design was to honour the Saviour of Mankind, and promote charity and benevolence among his followers of all denominations, I hope the purity of the motive will expiate any imperfections, that may appear in the performance.

The AUTHOR.

A SERMON.

LUKE ii. 10th and 11th verſes.

Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which ſhall be to all people.——For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Chriſt the Lord.

THE deſign of the Deity in ſending a Saviour into the world, who ſhould adorn our nature by his example, reform us by his laws, and expiate for our crimes by his death, was ſo vaſt in its nature and important in its conſequences, that none of the component parts of it, which are diſcoverable by reaſon, are unworthy our notice. The curioſity of a ſpeculative mind would of itſelf naturally excite an enquiry into every part of the Divine conduct unfolded by the works of creation, or the ſacred ſcriptures. But here the ſtrong and powerful motive of intereſt would be ſuperadded, to awaken our contemplation on the moſt wonderful event in the hiſtory of the intelligent world.

According to our ideas of power, wiſdom and greatneſs, we ſhould naturally ſuppoſe that the firſt ſcene, which introduced ſo illuſtrious a character

racter as the Lord Jeſus Chriſt unto the human drama, muſt be grand and awful, and attended with every circumſtance of pomp and magnificence, which could ſtrike the eyes and the ſenſes of men. This opinion would be warranted by a ſacred precedent, the promulgation of the law from Mount Sinai. If on that occaſion the mountain was covered with ſmoke, the thunders, the lightnings and the ſound of the trumpet occaſioned terror and diſmay in the minds of thoſe people, on whoſe account theſe divine energies were diſplayed, might we not infer that the effects of it in the natural world, and among intelligent creatures, would be proportionally more great and aſtoniſhing, when uſhering in a ſtill more glorious demonſtration of the Eternal to his creatures? In a word, that when the *Deſire of all Nations* made his appearance, not figuratively, but literally, God would ſhake the heavens and the earth, and fill, not only his temple at Jeruſalem, but the whole earth with his viſible glory?

In theſe, however, as well as in our other reaſonings on the government of God, we find that our moſt plauſible opinions are not always the beſt founded. Greatneſs and ſimplicity are nearly allied. Objects, which dazzle at the firſt, ſoon become familiar to the eye. Like the ſenſible horizon, they diminiſh in eſtimation, on experiment and knowledge. Others, which appear minute and inconſiderable, upon a cloſer inſpection diſcover marks of the deepeſt contrivance and profoundeſt deſign. The moſt beautiful and magnificent fabric, that was ever reared by human hand, can by the eye of the ingenious artiſt be eaſily traced from the baſis to the ſuperſtructure; while the origin of the ſmalleſt inſect in the animal,

mal, or the arcana of the leaſt plant in the vegetable world, cannot be explained by the moſt learned philoſopher. The reaſon is obvious.—The firſt is a human, the ſecond a divine production.

Correſponding with our laſt remarks, the birth of Jeſus Chriſt was not attended with the falſe glare of worldly glory and grandeur, nor with that pomp and oſtentation, which affect the imagination and ſenſes of the weak and unthinking of mankind. On a review, however, of all the circumſtances which attended that event, it would not be difficult to demonſtrate that the wiſdom of God in the moral and intelligent, is as much ſuperior to human calculations, as his ſublime and beautiful productions in the material creation are preferable to the monuments and beauties of art. For this cauſe the humble and retired village of Bethlehem was preferred to the populous and ſuperb city of Rome for the firſt appearance of the Meſſiah. A manger, not a palace, was the firſt ſcene to which the firſt and beſt of God's intelligent creatures was introduced. The unkind and inhoſpitable temper of thoſe who were preſent as ſpectators, was a preſage of the ingratitude of that world which he came to redeem; while at his birth, the contraſt between heavenly honours and earthly debaſement was an emblem of his future condition in the world—a ſtriking picture of a life made up of indigence, miſery and wonders.

The Almighty, however, gave to mankind ſufficient indications of his divine agency in ſo important an event as the nativity of the Redeemer. The celeſtial meſſengers were directed to announce thoſe joyful tidings to the ſhepherds in the vicinity.

vicinity. Other occurrences equally remarkable engaged the attention, of thoſe who, from the language of their ancient prophets, were waiting with anxiety for their patron and ſaviour, and fully perſuaded that the auſpicious æra was at hand.

The words of the text are a part of the meſſage announced by the angel. They point out his birth, and deſcribe its effects. As my main deſign is to ſpeak this day on the important advantages that mankind have derived from the advent and miſſion of Chriſt, I ſhall take the liberty to invert the order of the verſes in further proſecuting the ſubject.

I. I ſhall make ſome remarks on the wiſdom of Providence, that the birth of Chriſt ſhould be circumſtanced in the manner related by St. Luke and another evangeliſt. *For unto you is born this day a Saviour which is Chriſt the Lord.*

II. Take a ſummary view of the extenſive advantages which mankind have derived from the example of Jeſus Chriſt, and the principles of his religion. *Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which ſhall be unto all people.*

III. Offer a few reflections.

Firſt, I ſhall make ſome remarks on the wiſdom of Providence, that the birth of Chriſt ſhould be circumſtanced in the manner related by St. Luke and another evangeliſt. *For unto you is born*, &c.

Firſt of all, the nation among whom he was born had been from remote antiquity favoured with a divine revelation; in which clear and ſtrong indications were given of the deſigns of Providence

Providence reſpecting the redemption of mankind by Chriſt. To Abraham, the firſt of the Patriarchs, it was declared, *that in his ſeed all nations of the earth ſhould be bleſſed.* To his two immediate deſcendants a promiſe of like import was uttered. To Moſes, the great and inſpired lawgiver of the Jews, it was foretold, that a prophet like unto himſelf ſhould ariſe, armed with plenary powers, for the propagation of true religion and moral virtue in the world. By the ſucceeding prophets, particularly Iſaiah, not only the great and marvellous, but many of the moſt minute events of his life, as well as of the circumſtances of his ſufferings and death, were predicted with hiſtorical exactneſs. A people, who had ſuch credentials of the divine promiſes, were not only the moſt likely to receive the Meſſiah, but were the faireſt and fitteſt judges of his pretenſions. For they had little elſe to do, but to inſpect the inſpired language of their laws and prophets, and compare it with the accompliſhment in his life and actions. This cauſe may be rationally aſſigned why, in the counſels of Heaven, an obſcure part of an obſcure country was preferred, for the dawnings of the light of the world, to Greece, with her literary fame, or Rome, with the ſplendour and majeſty of her conqueſts.

In the *ſecond place*, the *family*, from which he deſcended afford us a remark ſimilar to the laſt. Humble and depreſſed in their fortunes, ſo far as to be obliged at his birth to take advantage of the ſacrifice cuſtomary for the poor; at the ſame time venerable for a long line of anceſtors, embracing both the ſanctity of Patriarchs and the majeſty of Kings. From theſe facts it is clear-

ly evident, that wealth is of no conſequence in the ſight of God, and that he meant to introduce Chriſt and his goſpel independent of any human influence; at the ſame time it was ordered by Providence, that nothing mean or degrading might take place in the nativity of ſo illuſtrious a perſonage.

Thirdly, The omens and prodigies attending his birth were juſt indications of his character and errand to the world. The Star in the eaſt was a harbinger of the Sun of Righteouſneſs. The anxious enquiry of the wiſe men implied, that a ſyſtem of truth and righteouſneſs was wanted to inſtruct mankind, notwithſtanding *the wiſdom of the world*. The pacific manner in which he was introduced to the world, quadrated with the humble temper and benevolent conduct diſplayed in every part of his private life or public miniſtry. The cruel jealouſy of Herod was the firſt accompliſhment of thoſe inſpired predictions, which announced him to be *a man of ſorrows*, from the cradle to the croſs, while his divine preſervation from the deſigns of that tyrant was a preſage of the ſucceſs of his goſpel againſt the claſhing intereſts and corrupt morals of the world.

A *fourth* obſervation which occurs, is, the fitneſs and propriety of that preciſe period of time aſſigned for his birth. The Aſſyrian, the Perſian, and the Grecian monarchies had been ſwallowed up by the Roman power. Profound peace was eſtabliſhed in all parts of the civilized world. From the cauſes laſt mentioned, it was a taſk neither difficult nor dangerous to travel from one country to another. It was an age which has been renowned for the progreſs of urbanity, and of the arts and ſciences. The ineſtimable remains

mains of ancient literature, the ſublime efforts of genius which have ſcarce ever been equalled, and we are ſure have never been exceeded by any nation or individual from that æra to the preſent, amply qualified that generation to detect falſehood and impoſture. For had the prejudices of the Jews been ſuch as to admit a deceiver from the hopes of national grandeur, ſtill they were but an inferior, weak province of a foreign government. Had Chriſt appeared at an earlier date, the diviſion of mankind into ſmall governments, independent of each other, and mutually hoſtile, would have required as conſtant prodigies in the whole proceſs, as were wrought at the firſt promulgation of the goſpel. The general expectation of both Jews and Gentiles that a prince and lawgiver was ſoon to ariſe, who ſhould govern the earth, prepared their minds for the reception of the Chriſtian ſyſtem, and its Author. Had God longer delayed his gracious deſigns, their expectations would have languiſhed for want of their completion. It was therefore in the fulneſs of time that God ſent forth his Son. By the convulſions and revolutions which preceded that event, the words of his holy prophet were fulfilled. *Every valley ſhall be exalted, every mountain and hill ſhall be made low, the crooked ſhall be made ſtrait, and the rough places plain. The glory of the Lord ſhall be revealed, and all fleſh ſhall ſee it together.*

The incidents already enumerated, juſtify the obſervations of a learned and ingenious author on the reſurrection, which we think will equally apply to the nativity of Chriſt, viz. that "God, in "unfolding his purpoſe to the world, differed "widely in his operations, from what would "have

" have been expected or calculated by human " ſagacity." That by a ſovereign act of power he could have ſubdued the whole human race to his law and will, there is no manner of queſtion. But, by adopting a different method, he has ſhown that his diſpenſations in the order of grace ſhall co-operate with his natural providence, and the ſettled laws by which rational, free agents are governed. In conſequence of this arrangement, the ſentiment of St. Paul was fully juſtified, *the weakneſs of God is ſtronger, and the fooliſhneſs of God is wiſer than man.* By inſtruments apparently the moſt feeble; from cauſes the moſt improbable, he has diſplayed the ſtrongeſt tokens of his goodneſs to mankind. He hath beſtowed the moſt valuable legacy (with deference be it ſpoken) which it was in his power to confer on the work of his hands.

Of the truth of the laſt aſſertion we ſhall be ſufficiently perſuaded, from the obſervations which will occur in the ſecond head of diſcourſe.

II. Let us take a ſummary view of the advantages, which mankind have derived from the example of Jeſus Chriſt, and the principles of his religion. *Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which ſhall be unto all people.*

Here we may make a pertinent enquiry, what changes have taken place in the religion, moral habits and cuſtoms of men, in conſequence of the coming of Chriſt, and at the ſame time demonſtrate the ſuperiority of the motives to piety and ſocial virtue, which are derived from our holy religion.

1. To the goſpel mankind are indebted for that firſt and grand article of all true religion, the UNITY OF GOD. This truth had not only been obſcured

obſcured, but obliterated by idolatry. Although the religion of the Jews, as delivered by Moſes, made this a principal and poſitive article in their creed; yet their frequent relapſes into the idolatry of other nations, and the very unworthy notions of the divine attributes, that were admitted among their traditions, prove that they, as well as all the reſt of human kind, ſtood in need of a teacher, who, by a divine warrant and by divine authority, ſhould give them a proper view of the ſubject. Granting this to be the caſe, with a people favoured with a pure though partial revelation of the Deity, we may very naturally conclude, that in nations and countries walking by the light of nature, it would be far worſe. Hiſtory confirms us in this ſuppoſition. For not merely the heavenly bodies, the ſun, moon and ſtars; but deceaſed princes and heroes, benefactors or tyrants of mankind, yea the beaſts of the field, and the inanimate parts of creation, received thoſe honours which are alone due to the Governor of heaven and earth. Who can reckon up the number of human victims, which were ſacrificed, either to procure their favour, or to appeaſe their wrath? Was there a paſſion or appetite, however black or polluted, lurking in the heart of man, but received a religious conſecration, and was made a part of divine worſhip? The ears of the chaſte would be wounded at the recital of the impure and abominable, thoſe of the humane and compaſſionate, with that of the infernal barbarities of the pagan rites. A bare alluſion to many of them would be too indecorous for an aſſembly of Chriſtians. Such facts did however exiſt, as to juſtify the deſcription of them by St. Paul in his epiſtles. *Profeſſing themſelves to be wiſe they became fools,*

fools, their fooliſh hearts were darkened, they were given up to a reprobate mind, they changed the glory of the inviſible God, to the likeneſs of corruptible man, to beaſts, to birds and reptiles. As far, therefore, as the primitive religion of nature, which comprizes the idea of one God, and him infinitely powerful, wiſe and good, is preferable to the *abominations of the heathen*, with all their brutal and barbarous modes of worſhip; as far as mankind have been enlightened in theſe doctrines by the goſpel, ſo far I affirm we are indebted to the birth and miniſtry of Jeſus Chriſt for the light and knowledge we enjoy. We ſhall offer no other argument in favour of our laſt aſſertion, than by aſking, in the language of a late learned and eminent writer,* "In what nation, city or "even village, has the doctrine of one eternal "God been publicly taught, except among the "Jews, previous to the commencement of Chriſ-"tianity?"

2. The ſtate of the heathen morality, compared with that of the goſpel, will give us a further view of the ſuperior advantages we enjoy. The belief that we are accountable to a being, who is infinitely pure and holy, who will reward the moſt ſecret acts of goodneſs, and puniſh vice whether ſecret or open, is I ſay common to every denomination of Chriſtians, however they may differ from each other in modes of worſhip. To do juſtly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly, to do to others as we would that others ſhould do to us, to forgive our enemies, and, as far as is conſiſtent with ſelf preſervation, to reſtore them to our affections, to harbour no malignity in our hearts, neither to envy the rich, nor deſpiſe

* *Thomas Sherlock, Biſhop of London.*

deſpiſe the poor, to viſit the afflicted, the friendleſs and the deſtitute, and relieve their neceſſities, to conduct in every relation of life as a good neighbour and a good citizen, to be ſevere and critical in examining our own conduct, to exerciſe charity, candour and moderation to all others, theſe are truths, which were taught by the precepts, and exemplified in the life of our bleſſed Saviour. Compare for a moment the principles and morals here laid down, with thoſe of the heathen world, where revenge was in many places conſidered as a virtue, where patriotiſm was but a faction againſt the liberty and happineſs of every country but their own, where men were in no capacity to learn truth or purity of conduct, from their laws, from their philoſophers, or from their ſocial inſtitutions, where the violation of virtue or decency was ſcarce thought worthy of a ſlight reproof, much leſs of a legal prohibition, where every crime againſt the peace of ſociety or individuals could be juſtified from the example of their Gods.

I am aware it will be objected, that the writings of many eminent men among the heathen recommended the practice of the ſocial virtues, and exhibited ſublime ſentiments of piety, in ſome reſpects not inferior to thoſe delivered in the New Teſtament. But in reply, it may be ſaid, that their influence and authority was greatly circumſcribed, and there was ſuch a mixture of the religious traditions of their country, as rendered it impoſſible that any general body of ethics ſhould be collected from them. We do not wiſh to depreciate their characters. We admire the efforts of their minds, labouring under ſo many diſadvantages. That the academy at Athens and the public

public ſchool at Sparta produced men of ſhining parts and romantic virtues, we do not deny; but let us look for a moment into the private manners of their beſt diſciples; how very remote were they from uniform morality! In one inſtance we know that the government of the civilized world was left to one of the moſt eminent philoſophers of all antiquity. Yet when ſupreme power was united with the higheſt degrees of human wiſdom and dignity of character, that it produced no general change for the better. It ſcarcely cleanſed the polluted atmoſphere of the court.

3. Let us conſider the alteration in human laws and cuſtoms, by the propagation of the goſpel.

Under the heathen ſyſtem, ſlavery or death was the uſual conſequence of being vanquiſhed in war. This warranted the moſt infernal cruelty in the conqueror, and the moſt obſtinate reſiſtance in the vanquiſhed. But the goſpel, by the doctrine of forgiving enemies, recommending them as objects of our love, has ſoftened the ferocious paſſions of men, changed the ſtern countenance of war, and in an infinity of examples bettered the condition of mankind. It has made good the pretenſions of its divine Author, who declared, that he came to bring deliverance unto the captives, the opening of the priſon to them that were bound, and to looſe thoſe that were appointed unto death. Equally ſalutary were the conſequences of the goſpel, by which polygamy was aboliſhed, and the affections and ſenſes of men reſtrained within ſuch limits, as from their tendency, promote friendſhip, mutual confidence, and the care of poſterity. In a word, by liberating the fairer part of creation from the dominion

of

of lawleſs appetites, by rendering the ſtate of marriage honourable and mutually advantageous, the ſource of innumerable private bleſſings; where every man's home would be an aſylum amidſt the cares and trials of life, where he might find the partner and companion of his heart inſtead of the ſlave of ſenſual appetite.

I add, that the conſtitution of the goſpel is highly favourable to the abolition of perſonal ſlavery. Its moſt ſacred myſteries are communicated equally to the rich and poor, to the maſter and ſervant. The ſentiment that every man is accountable for his actions at the tribunal of Jeſus Chriſt, that no diſtinctions will be admitted but thoſe of a moral nature, the doctrine delivered by the holy apoſtle St. Paul, *that in Chriſt there is neither bond nor free, but all one*, could not but have made a deep impreſſion, and procured a deciſive influence on all, who embrace that holy ſyſtem, to treat all mankind as brothers. It muſt from its tendency have inculcated the principles of liberty and equality, ſo far as they can exiſt conſiſtently with order and the ſocial compact.

In addition to thoſe laſt mentioned, may we not aſcribe to our holy religion the benefits which ariſe from literature, commerce and refinement, which have rendered Chriſtian countries ſo far ſuperior to the other parts of the globe? The care and pains with which the inſpired writings were preſerved, rendered the original languages, in which they were written, abſolutely neceſſary to be known, and the duties of devotion performed in the Latin language throughout Europe for many generations, were means in the hands of Providence for preſerving the noble compoſi-

tions of the ancients from deſtruction, under the great eclipſe of literature by the invaſion of the Goths and Vandals in the Weſt, and the Scythians and Arabs in the Eaſt, who effected the deſtruction of the Roman Empire. Otherwiſe, for any cauſe we can aſſign, the arts and ſciences would have been buried in the ruins of the Roman government. The civilized parts of Europe would have known no reſurrection of literature, but would in all probability have been as barbarous and brutal, as thoſe nations on the extremity of Aſia or America, which have been viſited by modern navigators.

4. Let us conſider the ſuperior motives, by which we are excited to moral virtue under the goſpel, to what were ever laid before mankind previous to that diſpenſation. The doctrine of pardon upon penitence, the ſufficiency of the Saviour's expiation to compenſate for our imperfect nature, and to raiſe us to a ſphere of exiſtence far beyond what the moſt perfect innocence could have hoped for from natural religion, have their origin in the New Teſtament. But, leſt ſuch indulgence ſhould be a foundation for licentiouſneſs, and counteract the purity of the Chriſtian doctrines, we are aſſured that the Supreme Being will admit none to his favour, till, ſubdued by divine grace, and clothed with humble reliance upon his goodneſs, both their hearts and habits are changed.

But among all the viſible effects of the goſpel, none are more worthy our grateful commemoration, than the doctrine of the immortality of the ſoul, and the reſurrection of the dead. Human laws and penalties from large experience are proved

proved to be insufficient either to encourage the good or to awe and reclaim the wicked, unless aided by the hopes and fears of another life, in which reward and punishment will be adjusted, not according to the promiscuous plan of Providence in this state, but by the everlasting principles of truth and righteousness. In this therefore man in a social view has reaped innumerable benefits from the coming of Christ. What might be considered a probability from the natural hopes of mankind, and the writings of great and good men not inspired, in consequence of the evidences and light of our holy religion, may be viewed as a moral certainty. If in the present mixed state all things come alike to all, and there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; if the sinner be clothed in purple and fare sumptuously every day, and the true child of virtue is deprived of the common bounties of heaven, our holy religion assures us, that in a very short time this scene will be shifted, the former will be comforted, the latter punished. Vice will be stripped of its false ornaments and its crown. Persecuted, conflicting, and persevering goodness will be reserved to adorn the triumph of the Redeemer at the great day. These hopes of our holy religion have banished the fears of silence and perpetual sleep. They teach us, that He, who was raised from the dead, will illuminate us through the dark valley of the shadow of death, and introduce us to the paternal mansions he has prepared, where are collected the wise and good of all past ages, whose numbers will constantly augment to the conclusion of time. If these doctrines give a relish to prosperity, how much more

necessary

neceſſary are they for the unfortunate? If they are a ſtimulus to virtue, are they not ſtill more wanted as a check upon the wicked?

Here, my brethren, you ſee a ſmall part of the glorious events, that have taken place in conſequence of the birth and advent of the Redeemer to the world. Might not the celeſtial meſſenger, more eſpecially when unfolding the dark volumes of futurity, he foreſaw the ſplendour of the ſpiritual throne of David, and thoſe bleſſings to the human kind which originated from the goſpel, be juſtified in declaring, *I bring you good tidings of great joy, which ſhall be unto all people.* Well might his celeſtial attendants reſpond to his ſentiments, *glory to God in the higheſt, peace on earth, and good will towards men.* Well might the aged and venerable prophet, inſpired with more than mortal joy, ſing his "nunc dimittis:" *Permit thy ſervant to depart, for mine eyes have ſeen the ſalvation, which thou haſt prepared before the face of all people.*

I now haſten, in the *third* place, to offer a few reflections.

Firſt, Something will be expected concerning the religious feſtival itſelf. A queſtion of this kind will naturally ariſe in your mind, why, if the birth of Chriſt be attended with ſo many advantages to mankind, ſhould not this day be honoured with religious ſolemnity? Wherefore have our anceſtors of the New-England ſtates, who founded our churches, refuſed it that honour and notice paid by all other Chriſtians? In reply, under patience and candour of the audience, I ſhall give you ſome among the more important of their objections, adding at the ſame time ſome ſentiments of my own. "In

" In the first place,* the day has never been " identified with such correctness, as to warrant " its observation. Were we to determine by the " time in which Zacharias officiated in the tem- " ple, we could gain no light upon the subject, " because the order and rank of priests were va- " ried at the pleasure of the Roman Governors. " In the next place, all their public records pe- " rished with their temple. Should it be com- " puted by the Roman census, when Cyrenius " was president of Syria, that period is placed " by some expositors at an earlier season of the " year. To the last objection may be added " another; that of *shepherds feeding their flocks by* " *night.* Though Palestine be in a climate much " warmer than our own, yet such an employ- " ment was improbable at that late season of " the year. To this perhaps their successors " would add, that the reformation of the calendar " half a century ago, has caused a variation of " eleven days in the time of its celebration.

" They further objected, that the festival is " enjoined neither by Christ nor his apostles in " any part of the New Testament, that there are " no traces to be found of it in the early and " pure ages of the church; from whence they " drew this inference, that at an after period it " was substituted for some pagan festival, after " the church had become corrupt.

" They considered it as a festival enjoined by " human authority, and therefore, as they dis- " puted all pretensions of that kind, as invading " the

* *These objections I have stated in my own language, from reading and recollection.*

" the kingdom of Chriſt, they on that account " refuſed it any particular notice or honour.

" Laſtly, it is probable, from the rigour and " ſeverity of their principles, they might diſlike " the manner in which it was obſerved by the ig- " norant and unthinking part of the community, " and might therefore view it as productive of " diſſipation and indecent mirth, and conſequent- " ly hoſtile to the intereſts of piety and virtue."

Theſe arguments have been recited rather to gratify the hearers than with a view or wiſh for polemical diſcuſſion. The greater part of them at the preſent day, conſidering the mutual good ſenſe of thoſe who deny or admit their weight, are of very little conſequence. I conceive the ſameneſs of the day is given up on all hands by the preſent Gregorian calendar. Good men we are ſenſible may differ in their opinions how far a power enjoining a poſitive act of worſhip, unexceptionable in itſelf, may be lodged in the church. But at the ſame time, however different their apprehenſions of the lawfulneſs of the authority, they may all perform the ſame acts of worſhip from different motives. Some may view the celebration of this day as an act of piety, becauſe it has its origin in venerable antiquity, and is ſupported by the example of the greater part of the Chriſtian world. Others, from voluntary effuſion of gratitude to the memory of Chriſt. A third party, having no objections to offer, may eſteem it a mark of charity and catholiciſm to unite in the devotion of their fellow Chriſtians.

If it be admitted by the candid and moderate of both parties, that ſome day ſhould be ſet apart for this purpoſe, I think we may infer, that the practice

practice of the churches of England and Geneva, the Proteſtant churches in Germany, the Greek churches in Aſia and Europe, which laſt comprize the religion of the Ruſſian Empire, ſhould give a decided preference to the preſent time.

For my own part, though I have the higheſt veneration for the founders of the New-England churches, yet I conceive it may be poſſible that, with hearts filled with piety, they might vibrate to an extreme in leſſer matters. As a mere *human* and compulſive injunction, I ſhould proteſt againſt the obſervation of the day. But as a free-will-offering to the Lord Jeſus Chriſt, as a voluntary honour to the ſeaſon of his birth, I could heartily wiſh, that every temple conſecrated to the moſt high God throughout the land were opened to commemorate, with proper ſenſibility and fervent gratitude, the benevolence of the Deity in ſending a Saviour. Certainly the thouſands, nay millions of ſincere Chriſtian profeſſors, engaged in this holy act of devotion and piety, would warm and elevate our religious affections. For juſt is the obſervation of the wiſe man, *iron ſharpeneth iron, ſo a man ſharpeneth the countenance of his friend.*

In the *ſecond place*, the day itſelf may lead us to ſome collateral reflections on the advantages of ſuch religious inſtitutions as occaſion pleaſure to the mind, and admit of ſome entertainment to the ſenſes. It may be juſtly offered in their defence, that when limited by a ſtrict veneration for religion and its Author, reſtrained by decorum from ſenſual exceſſes, when they neither are allowed to promote idolatry, or treſpaſs on the calls of common life, they deſerve reverence and attention

attention not only from the devout man, but even from the good citizen. The Deity in the abſtract is too ſublime for our conceptions. His original cannot be inveſtigated by the moſt profound thought or elevated powers of the human ſoul. We therefore form our ideas of him from the nobleſt images of created excellence; from the beſt moral and intelligent qualities of the mind. Theſe, though infinitely ſhort of his eſſence, yet are neceſſary aids to aſſiſt us in the duties of piety. For *who can by ſearching find out God, who can find out the Almighty to perfection? It is high as heaven, what canſt thou do? Deeper than hell, what canſt thou know? The meaſure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the ſea.* The Almighty, therefore, in exhibiting himſelf to his creatures, has condeſcended to the preſent frame and condition of man. Accordingly he manifeſted himſelf to his ancient people by viſible demonſtrations of his power. To Adam under the repreſentation of a man walking in the garden in the cool of the day; to Moſes and the people of Iſrael by a pillar of light; and afterwards to the ſame people by the Shechinah, which was a ſymbol of his power and preſence, reſiding between the Cherubims. Laſt of all, he manifeſted himſelf to mankind by his Son, *the brightneſs of his glory*, deſigned as a very picture of himſelf, through which they might adore him. From theſe facts we infer, that though idolatry is juſtly to be reprobated, yet from the nature of mankind, religion ought, in ſome meaſure, to be adapted to the ſenſes. And we are juſtified in this obſervation by the words of the apoſtle, *wherein he directs*

directs, to glorify God not only with our ſpirits, but with our bodies which are his.

Social worſhip, the obſervation of the Sabbath, Baptiſm, and the Lord's Supper, are eſſential, in the preſent order of nature, for the preſervation of the Chriſtian ſyſtem. We therefore find each of theſe ſtrictly enjoined, either by precept or example, in the New Teſtament. Our annual Faſts and Thankſgivings, conſidered as voluntary homage to the Supreme Being, deprecating his diſpleaſure, ſoliciting his protection, and acknowledging his paſt goodneſs, are not venerable merely for being coeval with the ſettlement of the country; but are cuſtoms wiſe and good in themſelves. Very few are there, who are ſo capable of contemplation, as to ſupport internal religion, if all public forms ſhould be laid aſide. Of theſe, none are more pleaſing than ſuch as awaken a cheerful gratitude to God, or lead us to meditate on ſuch parts of the divine conduct, as are in the higheſt degree intereſting to ourſelves.

This ſubject is more important, than we ſhould at firſt ſuppoſe. For it may be an enquiry worthy of wiſe and good men, whether the gloomy medium, through which religion has been viewed by many in the land, hath not had a tendency to promote infidelity or deſpair? Whether it may not have been productive of the horrors of fanaticiſm, ariſing from the moſt unworthy notions of the divine character, on the one hand; or on the other, of that irrational exuberant enthuſiaſm, ſo hoſtile to order and decency in public worſhip; *the parent of confuſion and every evil work?* Were I compelled to chooſe, I ſhould rather adopt a religion

religion admitting as facred rites ſports and paſtimes perfectly innocent, than one holding up to view our *Heavenly Father* as an implacable tyrant, enacting laws impoſſible to be obeyed, and for their *neceſſary* violation, inflicting puniſhments unſpeakably ſevere, infinitely diſproportional, and terrible beyond conception; and, furthermore, repreſenting his favour as conciliated by no other means, than by ſacrificing, to what is blaſphemouſly ſtiled his glory, the love of our proper nature implanted in us by himſelf, and by a cheerful acquieſcence in ſuffering *the vengeance of eternal fire* to expiate the unpardonable crime of our exiſtence.

Thirdly, The pleaſing union of different denominations of Chriſtians in the ſolemnities of the day leads me to remark, that the variety of *ſects* in the Chriſtian world, although conſidered as a defect, are eſſential, in the preſent order of things, for the preſervation of religion and morality. Did our nature and circumſtances admit, nothing would be more grateful to a pious mind, than that all the children of Adam, with one mode, heart and tongue, ſhould pay their devout acknowledgments to their common Parent and Benefactor. But from dear bought experience we find, that all attempts to introduce uniformity in matters of religion have not only been inefficient, but productive of infinite evils in ſociety. "A variety of religious denominations may, for "aught we know, be the moſt ſuitable to the "unſearchable nature of the Deity." It is morally certain, however, that it is a neceſſary check on ſuperſtition, and promotes a laudable emulation among different ſects to rival one another in

in animated devotion, and purity of conduct. If a ſingle ſect, however pure and honeſt in their intentions, ſhould prevail ſo far as to exclude a toleration of others, it would ſoon reſemble a great body of ſtagnant water, which, by becoming corrupted, emits polluted air and peſtilential vapours. The pure principles of Chriſtianity would become contaminated by a communication with the intereſts of this world. The churches might encreaſe in the ſplendour of their appearance, but internal piety and the majeſty of holineſs would vaniſh. The generous and liberal proviſion, devoted for the purpoſes of public inſtruction, would eventually become the excluſive patrimony of pride, indolence, and intereſt with the great, inſtead of the rewards of true godlineſs, ſtrict morality, and literary labour.

Fourthly, While we contemplate the bleſſings which have flowed from the birth of the Saviour, let us not forget to praiſe God for the light and knowledge of the preſent day, for the reformations in religion by reducing it to its primitive ſimplicity. Within two centuries what a happy change! The iron hand of perſecution is not only maimed, but we hope ſtricken off from the trunk. The United States of America are added to the liſt of Chriſtian nations, who, to the bleſſings of religion in its native ſimplicity, have added ſuch free and glorious conſtitutions of civil government, as have exhibited the higheſt point to which human felicity can be carried. The moſt free and rational enquiries on civil and religious ſubjects are not only allowed, but invited. The ſour, unſocial ſpirit of bigotry is obliged to lay aſide its former inſolence, and diſguiſe its nature,

nature, or retreat to the habitations of ignorance and folly. And it is with pleaſure I can announce, that the liberal and catholic ſpirit among Chriſtians of different opinions at the preſent day, reflects high honour on our common goſpel. We feel, and may we ever feel its bleſſed effects! Let us then lay aſide all bitterneſs, and even coolneſs and ſhyneſs to one another; like "brethren "of the ſame family of different chriſtian names." Let our only zeal and emulation be, to excel each other in piety, and in the practice of thoſe virtues that embelliſh and dignify human life.

Our own age has been pregnant with wonders. From cauſes little contemplated, the moſt ſurprizing revolutions have taken place in the old world. Already ſuperſtition has fallen from her baſis. On her ruins has been erected the ſhort but abominable dominion of atheiſm. The votaries of the former we hope will be convinced by their intercourſe with foreign countries, that they have ſeen Chriſtianity through a falſe medium. The advocates of the latter have, by a dreadful experiment, been convinced of theſe eternal truths, *that man was made to worſhip God, and that ſociety cannot ſubſiſt without religion.*

But however theſe important commotions may operate on the minds of men in thoſe parts of the globe where they exiſt, I ſincerely pray they may have a tendency to excite in us a love and reverence for the religious inſtitutions of our country. Look to the effects of that piety and thoſe manly virtues for which our venerable anceſtors were renowned. Behold them in the numerous and beautiful fabrics erected to the honour and worſhip of God, in our univerſities, in

our

our public ſchools of learning, in the rapid progreſs of the arts and ſciences, in all the comforts and even elegancies of life, in their induſtry, and thoſe improvements, which have rendered our land the praiſe and joy of all the earth, in a community the moſt moral and enlightened of any known from the creation to the preſent day; religion, I ſay the religion of Jeſus was the ſoul that animated all their labours, and converted a gloomy wilderneſs to a paradiſe for their offspring.

Theſe are ſufficient cauſes, my brethren, why we ſhould venerate the religion delivered by Jeſus Chriſt;* why we ſhould look upon it not as a vain and popular ſuperſtition, but as the nobleſt inheritance we have derived from our fathers, as a tie of common confidence, equally a bulwark and ornament of our country.

While we ſee the partial effects of the Redeemer's kingdom thus ſalutary to mankind, what may we not infer, when he ſhall conſummate his kingdom in the new heavens and earth which ſhall be prepared for his reſidence! *When the body of ſin ſhall be deſtroyed*, and nature, purged from her ancient contagion, ſhall be reſtored to her primitive innocence and glory! When his right hand ſhall ſlay the crooked ſerpent, and the brightneſs of his coming ſhall ſcatter and deſtroy the effects of death and natural evil! Theſe things may appear diſtant to us; but he who has promiſed is faithful. From the honour and veracity of his character, it would be impious to queſtion the aſſurance that is given, that the kingdoms of this world ſhould become the kingdoms of our Lord

* ——— *Non hæc ſolemnia nobis,*
Vana ſuperſtitio veterumve ignara deorum,
Impoſuit. Virgil, Æ. viii. 185.

Lord and of his Chriſt, and he ſhall reign forever and ever.

Animated and inſpired by theſe hopes, let me conjure you to pour forth your warmeſt affections, your ſincereſt gratitude, to the infant of Bethlehem. What a triumph did our nature receive, when perfect holineſs in the perſon of Immanuel came and dwelt in fleſh! "When he overcame "the ſharpneſs of death, he opened the kingdom "of heaven to all true believers." Let the incenſe you now offer to your great Friend and Benefactor, be ſincere piety, accompanied with a humble and contrite ſpirit. Truſt me when I aſſure you, that this will be a more acceptable preſent to the great Judge of hearts, than thouſands and tens of thouſands of victims, which you might offer, or ſhrines and temples of the higheſt beauty and magnificence, which you ſhould erect in honour of his memory.

Finis.